**12 Congress**

Print It and Get Going

**Study on the Go**

Print out these study cards and take them with you. It's the perfect way to get that last minute cramming session in before your exam.

[Print](http://thethinkspot.com/system/pdf/ThinkSpot-american-gov-2011-chapter12.pdf)

The enactment of healthcare reform provides a backdrop for studying the processes and politics of the U.S. Congress.

**What We Learned**

***1. How have structural differences affected the development of the House and Senate?*** The U.S. has a bicameral legislature with a House and a Senate. Whereas states are equally represented in the Senate, representation in the House depends on a state’s population. Senators run for election statewide to serve six-year terms; House members run from districts to serve two-year terms. Although the Constitution assigns certain responsibilities to the Senate, the two chambers share other tasks, including enacting legislation. The Senate is individualistic, with many important decisions requiring supermajority approval. Members of the House have a reputation for devotion to technical expertise, personalized constituency service, and responsiveness to local political interests.

***2. What are the qualifications for and characteristics of members of Congress?*** The U.S. Constitution requires that members of the House be no less than 25 years of age, American citizens for at least seven years, and residents of the state in which their district is located. Senators must be at least 30 years old, citizens for at least nine years, and residents of the state they represent. Although Congress is more diverse than at any time in its history, white males of European ancestry are still over-represented. Traditionally, members of Congress got things done and advanced their careers by building relationships with colleagues, deferring to senior members, and bargaining. In today’s Congress, some members have become skilled media entrepreneurs, using media coverage to establish themselves as national political figures. Members of Congress perform constituency service and cultivate ties with their districts, which are important for their reelection. Despite the absence of term limits, congressional turnover is substantial because members often choose not to seek reelection.

***3. How is Congress organized in terms of both leadership and committee structure?*** The organization of the House and Senate is based on political party. The Senate Majority Leader and the Speaker of the House are the most important legislators in their respective chambers. They influence the membership of committees, refer legislation to committee, and control the flow of business to the floor, which is especially important in the House. The Speaker and Majority Leader are political party leaders, working to advance their party’s policy interests and maintain their majority. Members of Congress have a strong incentive to cooperate with their party leadership because their success is tied to the success of their political party.

The detailed work of Congress takes place in committee and subcommittee. House members, with fewer committee assignments, are better able to specialize than are senators. Members of Congress request committee assignments from party committees responsible for assignment decisions, and committees dealing with money are in great demand. The majority party enjoys a majority on and chairs every committee and subcommittee. Each party has its own procedures for selecting committee chairs (for the majority party) and ranking members (for the minority party).

***4. What are the steps in the legislative process for a bill to become a law?*** Today’s Congress has adopted modifications in the traditional legislative process to increase the likelihood that it can pass major legislation. Once a bill or resolution is introduced, it is assigned a number and referred to committee, where the detailed work of Congress takes place. Major legislation is often referred to more than one committee, especially in the House. Committees and subcommittees hold hearings, debate the details of legislation, and revise, amend, and rewrite a measure in a process known as legislative markup. In the House, most measures that clear standing committee go to the Rules Committee, which sets a time limit for debate and the ground rules for amendments. In the Senate, a measure typically reaches the floor through the mechanism of a unanimous consent agreement (UCA). A senator who opposes a measure may filibuster to delay and attempt to kill a bill. Cloture, the procedure for shutting off a filibuster, requires 60 votes. A measure must pass the House and Senate in identical form before it has passed Congress. If the two chambers pass similar but not identical bills, one chamber can accept the version of the legislation passed by the other chamber, the two chambers can pass a series of reconciling amendments, or they can create a conference committee to negotiate a single measure, which must then be voted on again and passed by the House and Senate. After a bill passes Congress, it goes to the president who can sign, veto, or permit it to become law without signature.

**Tips for Success**

**Offer solutions, not excuses:** When you present your professor (or your boss) with a problem, also present a possible solution. For example: “I can’t take the exam when it’s scheduled because my daughter is having surgery that day, but I can come in the week before to take it early if that’s convenient.”

**Key Terms**

**Appropriation Bill**

a legislative authorization to spend money for particular purposes

**Bicameral**

a two-house legislature

**Bill**

a proposed law

**Cloture**

the procedure for ending a filibuster

**Conferees**

members of a conference committee

**Conference Committee**

a special congressional committee created to negotiate differences on similar pieces of legislation passed by the House and Senate

**Conference Report**

a revised bill produced by a conference committee

**Constituency Service**

the action of members of Congress attending to the individual, particular needs of constituents

**Discharge Petition**

a procedure whereby a majority of the members of the House of Representatives can force a committee to report a bill to the floor of the House

**Filibuster**

an attempt to defeat a measure through prolonged debate

**Floor**

the full House or full Senate taking official action.

**Franking Privilege**

free postage provided to members of Congress

**House Majority Leader**

the second ranking figure in the majority party in the House

**House Rules Committee**

a standing committee that determines the rules under which a specific bill can be debated, amended, and considered on the House floor

**Impeach**

the act of formally accusing an official of the executive or judicial branches of an impeachable offense

**Joint Committee**

a committee that includes members from both houses of Congress

**Killer Amendment**

an amendment designed to make a measure so unattractive that it will lack enough support to pass

**Legislative Markup**

the process in which legislators go over a measure line-by-line, revising, amending, or rewriting it

**Logrolling**

an arrangement in which two or more members of Congress agree in advance to support each other’s favored legislation

**Minority Leaders**

the heads of the minority party in the House or Senate

**Multiple Referral of Legislation**

the practice of allowing more than one committee to consider legislation

**Non-Germane Amendments**

amendments which are unrelated to the subject matter of the original measure

**omnibus bills**

complex, highly detailed legislative proposals covering one or more subjects or programs

**Party Caucus**

all of the party members of the House or Senate meeting as a group

**Pocket Veto**

the action of a president allowing a measure to die without signature after Congress has adjourned

**Resolution**

a legislative statement of opinion on a certain matter

**Rider**

a provision, unlikely to become law on its own merits, that is attached to an important measure so that it will ride through the legislative process

**Senate majority leader**

the head of the majority party in the Senate

**Senate President Pro Tempore**

the presiding officer of the Senate in the vice president’s absence.

**seniority**

length of service

**Speaker of the House**

the presiding officer in the House of Representatives and the leader of the majority party in that chamber

**Special or Select Committee**

a committee established for a limited time only

**Sponsor**

a member who introduces a measure

**Standing Committee**

a permanent legislative committee with authority to draft legislation in a particular policy area or areas

**Structured Rules**

rules that specify the conditions for debate and amendments

**Supermajority**

a voting margin that is greater than a simple majority

**Table**

to postpone consideration of a measure during the legislative process

**Term Limitation**

the movement to restrict the number of terms public officials may serve

**Unanimous Consent Agreement (UCA)**

a formal understanding on procedures for conducting Senate business that requires acceptance by every member of the chamber

**Veto**

an action by the chief executive refusing to approve a measure passed by the legislature

**Whips**

assistant floor leaders in Congress

**Discussion Questions**

1. Compare the House and Senate in terms of their structures, responsibilities, and characteristics.

2. What are the arguments for and against term limits for Congress members? Which do you find more persuasive, and why?

3. Describe the different kinds of Congressional committees. What advantages does the majority party have related to committee membership and leadership?

4. Describe the process for a bill to become a law, using the healthcare reform bill as an example.

5. What options does the president have to deal with legislation passed by Congress?

**Interactive Activity**

**Simulation: How a Bill Becomes a Law**

Although about 9,000 bills are considered each year, only ten percent become laws. In fact, when you consider the difficult route a bill must undergo in order to become a law, it is remarkable that any legislation ever gets passed. Why is it so difficult for a bill to become a law? What type of backstage negotiation and compromise is involved in lawmaking? How does this negotiation and compromise affect the democratic process? In this activity, you will examine these and other issues as you represent a consumer advocacy group interested in passing a bill that would prevent credit cards from engaging in predatory lending. In the process, you will learn about the different steps involved in the lawmaking, understand the roles that key political leaders in the Congress and the president play in passing legislation, and identify the congressional committees essential to the lawmaking process.

[View Simulation](http://media.pearsoncmg.com/long/long_longman_media_1/2008_raised/Player/sim.billbecomeslaw.html)

**“Talking About American Government” Podcasts**

Author Neal Tannahill discusses the most important concepts in this chapter

* [Democrats Reach 60 Seats in the U.S. Senate](http://pearsonpodcasting.pearsoncmg.com/playlists/think-american-government-neal-tannahill/episodes/democrats-reach-60-seats-us-senate#podcast-4)
* [No Child Left Behind](http://abavtooldev.pearsoncmg.com/VPStreaming/audio.php?clipID=ab_amgov_think_tennahill/ch03_nclb.mp3)
* [Separation of Powers](http://abavtooldev.pearsoncmg.com/VPStreaming/audio.php?clipID=ab_amgov_think_tennahill/ch03_separation_powers.mp3)
* [Federalism](http://abavtooldev.pearsoncmg.com/VPStreaming/audio.php?clipID=ab_amgov_think_tennahill/ch03_fiscal_federalism.mp3)
* [States](http://abavtooldev.pearsoncmg.com/VPStreaming/audio.php?clipID=ab_amgov_think_tennahill/ch03_states.mp3)
* [Delegated Powers](http://abavtooldev.pearsoncmg.com/VPStreaming/audio.php?clipID=ab_amgov_think_tennahill/ch03_delegated_powers.mp3)
* [Implied Powers](http://abavtooldev.pearsoncmg.com/VPStreaming/audio.php?clipID=ab_amgov_think_tennahill/ch03_implied_powers.mp3)
* [Federal Grants and Money](http://abavtooldev.pearsoncmg.com/VPStreaming/audio.php?clipID=ab_amgov_think_tennahill/ch03_federalism.mp3)
* [SCHIP](http://abavtooldev.pearsoncmg.com/VPStreaming/audio.php?clipID=ab_amgov_think_tennahill/ch03_schip.mp3)